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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the perceptions of three rural secondary school teachers in the Riverina area of New South Wales, Australia. In-depth interviews were conducted with three secondary teachers: three male teachers aged 25, 32, and 60. The original objective of the grounded theory study was to examine the teachers' perceptions about the state's 1999-2000 labor dispute with teachers and how the dispute impacted teachers' personal and professional lives, particularly professional satisfaction and teachers' perceived status within the community. However, the actual interviews revealed that the labor dispute served to highlight teachers' primary concerns with the intensification and complexity of their profession. Themes and concepts that emerged from the interviews included the influence of economic rationality on education policy, as highlighted during the labor dispute; the role and relevance of unionism in the profession; the importance of intrinsic rewards in teacher retention; the impact of extrinsic factors (such as negative community perceptions of the profession) on professional and personal satisfaction; the perceived status of the profession from inside and outside the profession; and the role of the media in promoting positive and negative portrayals of the profession. (Contains 46 references.) (Author/SV)

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An initial exploration into a time of change: Teacher perceptions of their profession in the new millennium

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Abstract

This paper discusses the perceptions that three Riverina-based secondary schoolteachers have of their profession as told to the researcher during in-depth, individual interviews. This study places the participants within a particular historical context, that is immediately after the May 2000 resolution of the 1999/2000 NSW industrial dispute, and seeks to understand how the dispute impacted upon their professional and personal lives. What emerged from this study, and from interviews with other Riverina-based schoolteachers that have taken place since these participants were originally interviewed, is that the lives and perceptions of these teachers are extremely complex. By initially investigating their perceptions of the impact of the industrial dispute on their professional and personal lives, it became extremely evident that issues and concerns important to teachers are not merely limited to those of an industrial nature.

Themes and concepts that have emerged from this grounded theory study include: the intensification and complexity of profession, perceptions of the influence of economic rationality in education policy as highlighted during the industrial dispute, the role and relevance of unionism in the profession, the importance of intrinsic rewards in teacher retention/attrition, the impact of extrinsic factors (such as negative community perceptions of the profession) on professional and personal satisfaction, perceived status of the profession from within and outside the profession, and the role the media plays in promoting positive and negative portrayals of the profession. By deconstructing the lived realities of these teachers and using their voices to tell their stories, it is intended that we may gain a clearer understanding of what it is like to be a rural secondary school teacher at the dawning of a new millennium.

Introduction

The idea of exploring the professional and personal lives of rural teachers developed during the compilation of my literature review which revealed the apparent existence of great disenchantment and dissatisfaction of teachers in relation to the intensification and declining status of the profession. The absence of a substantial body of literature relating to how teachers think the community perceives them and the impact of these perceptions on their professional and personal lives of teachers also encouraged the investigation of these issues (Blackmore, 1999; Lampert, 2000). This curiosity was further aroused by the researcher's observation of the role the mass

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media played and its impact on the community's perception of teachers during the 1999-2000 industrial dispute, especially in her rural community. It was then decided that by using the 1999/2000 industrial dispute involving NSW independent and government schoolteachers to place the research in a particular historical context, the perceptions of rural secondary school teachers may be revealed at a critical period in their careers.

Initially, the researcher wanted to investigate the role of unions in this dispute and how the unions served their members during this particular period. However, when the actual interviews took place it became clear that industrial dispute context highlighted the teachers' primary focuses – the intensification and complexity of the profession, the greater levels of accountability and expectations, the perceived declining status and lack of understanding and support of the profession by non-teachers, and the importance of intrinsic rewards in relation to the personal and professional satisfaction of teachers in the absence of extrinsic rewards (such as status within the community or financial rewards) (Ellis, 1984 cited in Latham, 1998). These factors were observed to play a pivotal role in the professional and personal satisfaction of the teachers and have a significant impact on the teachers' self-perception.

The primary objective of the pilot grounded theory study was to *reveal the perceptions held of three different secondary teachers about the 1999/2000 industrial dispute and its key role players and, how this dispute impacted on the professional and personal lives (especially their degree of professional satisfaction and their perceived status within the community).* In order to elucidate each participant's perspective, the task of the researcher was to use semi-structured (an interview schedule was used to provide some key questions that needed to be addressed and was developed during the literature review process), in-depth, hour long interviews to encourage the teachers to 'tell their story' and provide valuable 'insider knowledge' in a way that encouraged reflexivity and gave insight to their lived reality (Lampert, 2000; Loughran, 1996; Wolcott, 1985 cited in Dinham 1997). As a project within the field of 'teachers' voice research', (Acker, 1995), the participants were encouraged to dominate the interview and were not inhibited from deviating from the set questions where appropriate. The interview questions were designed to encourage descriptive

responses from the participants, rather than simple yes/no answers. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Metz 2000; Wolcott, 1985 cited in Dinham, 1997).

The focus of the study was originally limited, so as to be able to engage in research that was reasonable in size and complexity, and that could be completed within the time and financial resources available. As such, the three participants who provided the data for this study were selected due to their disparate ages and experience within the educational field. As this small-scale research project sought to illuminate, understand and interpret meaning or nature of the experiences of three individual teachers in great depth, grounded theory methodology allowed the researcher to obtain the intricate details about the feelings, thought processes and emotions of the participants, which may have been difficult to extract or understand through the implementation of more conventional research methods, such as those within the quantitative framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory methodology allows the theory to emerge from the data, and is therefore is more likely to resemble 'reality', offer insight, and enhance understanding of the phenomena being researched (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Principles of grounded theory guided the conceptual coding, comparative analysis and theoretical sampling of the data in order to highlight abstractions and interconnections between the collected data (Loughran, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This analysis ensured that nothing was taken for granted (such as, tone of voice, physical gestures, use of rhetorical questions and sarcasm, or the making of jokes) and that all statements were intently analysed in order to highlight and understand the lived reality of the participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The collection of data was guided by a theoretical orientation based within the post-structuralist approach. That is, the researcher was directed by the need to hear the voices of the teachers and not to ignore their role in the education system, in order to interpret, inform and illuminate the impact of the recent industrial disputation on the professional and private lives of teachers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990 cited in Dinham, 1997).

This project does not seek to provide representativeness or generalisability. Instead it attempts to sensitively and objectively recognise and explain the impact of industrial disputation and its related issues, on the professional and personal lives of three

secondary teachers, with a wide spectrum of experience, living and working in a rural area of NSW, by using their true 'voices'.

The perspectives of three members of a 'peculiar profession'

Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed several broad themes – the teachers felt somewhat alienated from and misunderstood by the wider community; the teachers clearly conveyed their belief that their profession had intensified while their status had declined; the teachers' experience of the 1999/2000 industrial dispute was quite negative; however, the teachers were overall, quite satisfied with their chosen profession.

The data were then compartively analysed and as the different responses of the participants to particular questions that related to the emergent themes were compared, certain concepts gained clarity. Within these themes, particular concepts emerged, such as: role intensification; alienation; 'deflated footy' feelings (that is feelings of frustration and powerlessness); paradoxical nature of the profession; extrinsic and intrinsic rewards; and professional satisfaction. These concepts were then related to each other, using the voices of the participants to present a picture of how three secondary teachers, living and working within a rural community, experience their profession and its impact on their personal lives during a critical incident of industrial disputation. Their story is explained as follows.

In order to understand how teachers perceive themselves, it is essential, to discover why they chose to enter the teaching profession (Musgrave, 1972). **AB** is a twenty-five year old male with a Bachelor of Social Science (Human Movement and Recreation) and Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary – PD/H/PE) and has been teaching for the past four years in a single sex, non-government high school in a rural area of NSW. He has been PD/H/PE co-ordinator temporarily and wishes to make this a permanent position in the future. AB was motivated to become a teacher because it provided:

> *...the opportunity to hopefully educate some young minds into creating them into better adults.*

CD is a thirty-two year old male with a Bachelor of Education and Diploma of Education and has been teaching for the past thirteen years, in both the government

and non-government systems. He has been sportsmaster, PD/H/PE co-ordinator, Year co-ordinator and has recently completed a Master of Education Administration, with a view to entering the administration area of education in the future. CD, unlike the other two participants, and approximately 75% of the 17 teachers who have been interviewed since and reported that teaching was not one of their first career preferences, stated:

> *... I've wanted to teach from Year Eight onwards. I saw the lifestyle and had some good teachers in Year Eight...*

CD acknowledges that while working with adults in the administration of the school, such as other teachers, the NSW DET and the BOSNSW, and interacting with parents and community members is important, *"... the real focus is working with the kids"*, which as will be further discussed is an important intrinsic motivation for teachers.

EF is a sixty-year old male who began teaching in 1960 when he was a member of the Christian Brothers religious order. After leaving the Christian Brothers, EF taught and has been principal in several primary schools in NSW and the ACT. He taught upper primary and was an ESL teacher on Christmas Island in the mid-1970s. He joined the secondary school system in the early 1980s after completing a Graduate Diploma of Education in Religious Education and has remained a secondary school teacher ever since. Most recently, he spent two years being involved in Christian faith development with inner-city adults in a metropolitan area, who were homeless or had psychological disturbances, on a semi-volunteer basis. He has since returned to secondary teaching in a rural city. EF has taught in the government and non-government systems throughout his career. When asked why he decided to become a teacher, EF's reply was surprising, given his long-term experience within the teaching profession, in that he stated:

> *...I didn't want to become a teacher, so much as I just became a teacher, as it was handed to me ... it was just the way it happened. I would have rather worked on farms and that sort of thing.*

While acknowledging that teaching was not his original choice of professions, EF further explained that the intrinsic rewards of working with children and his colleagues has allowed him to remain motivated despite his perception that the status of teaching has declined throughout his career. He revealed:

Through opportunity I fell into teaching and I think what I like most about it, personally, was the personal involvement with people everyday. I like kids, I like their sense of humour, I like their outward-boundedness and I enjoy the staff camaraderie ... Whenever I then maybe have had the opportunity to consider another career, I often think, how would I get on not having any of that? I just find I enjoy the stimulation.

It is evident that these participants share the common motivation of wanting to work with children in their decision to enter and remain in the profession. As will be further discussed, intrinsic rewards or motivations, such as this, are crucial factors in teacher satisfaction, commitment and retention, as compared with other extrinsic rewards such as salary.

An 'always intense' but 'more demanding' professon - Acknowledgement, acceptance, and resentment of role intensification

Much literature has highlighted that in recent years the role of teachers has intensified with schools having become the "wastebaskets of society" (Halsey, 1980 cited in Hargreaves, 1994, p. 5). Schools have been given the responsibility of solving various social, economic, and environmental problems that the postmodern society is unable (or perhaps unwilling) to address and are held publicly accountable if they fail to meet these responsibilities (Hargreaves, 1994; Hobsbawm, 1995). Analysis of the interviews revealed that the participants acknowledge this role intensification when they were asked to describe their voluntary and essential teaching duties. AB stated that his contractual essential duties included:

... being at school from 8.15am until 4.00pm; three meetings per week; six duties a week; lesson plans written in his teaching chronicle available for administrative assessment; and programming/curriculum development...

Further CD reported that *"...it would not be an exaggeration..."* that he works between forty and fifty-five hours each week, with this number greatly increasing during hectic times on the school calendar such as when end of term reports are due or programming needs to be formalised.

EF believes that the teaching profession has *"always been intense"*, but believes that teaching has now become a profession that:

It is a lot more time demanding ...with teaching it is part of your essential duties to be available throughout your lunchtime, which basically means you're working from 8.00am until 4.30pm without a break...

The responses of the participants convey their continual battle to convince people that their professional day does not begin at 9.00am and finish at 3.00pm. The weariness in their voices and rote-like recitation of their working conditions, clearly announced to the researcher that they had been asked this question before. The recited response conveyed that they always provided the same answer to this question and perhaps did not result in them feeling as though their statement was believed by those outside the profession, as will be further discussed. CD further reinforced this interpretation with his use of "*...would not be an exaggeration...* " in his explanation of his normal working hours. Dinham's (1997) Australian study, as well as his English study (1999), also reported that the teachers interviewed have similar views as EF, in that the workload of teachers has increased enormously in recent years.

The teachers appeared to be resigned to the fact that their occupation is extremely complex and intense, and that many people grossly underestimate what the role of teacher entails. The perceived failure of the broader community to understand what the work of teachers involves, coupled with the greater expectations placed on the teachers through the public accountability processes (such as ELLA testing, HSC and SC results and programming registration) also increases the pressure on teachers to flawlessly perform all that is expected of them. As EF states:

... If you don't deal with it [a student's need] then you wear it. If something happens then you wear it – that's what I think people aren't aware of

This intensification of the teaching profession is especially evident in relation to the expansion of the voluntary duties that teachers are now expected to perform, as well as the expanded essential duties they are required to perform. The completion of these 'voluntary' duties (such as sports and academic coaching, committee membership and meetings) further intensify the work of the teachers, yet must be completed if they are to provide the highest standard education to the students, as well as satisfy the demands of the school, the community and the government (Robertson &

Chadbourne, 1998). This intensity is evident in the statement of AB who stated that some of his voluntary duties included:

> *Numerous excursions [that go outside school hours]...do that about ten times each year plus football excursions plus numerous staff meetings after hours, P and F meetings that are all voluntary, parent information nights, parent/teacher interviews, new parent dinners ... coaching after school ... none of that's in your contract and I don't really have to do that if I don't want to...*

The demands being placed on the teachers' physical, emotional, and intellectual reserves are apparently quite substantial and may be viewed as a form of "ideological regulation" within the school system/structure (Robertson & Chadbourne, 1998, p. 20). The acceptance of the expectation that teachers should perform these voluntary duties as a part of their professional responsibility was evident in the statements of the duties voluntarily fulfilled by all three participants, as well as teachers encountered by the researcher in her casual employment within the secondary school system. According to AB, teachers who do not perform these duties are the targets of "*whinging and bitching*" and may even be coerced into performing these duties so it is more "*fair*" on the teaching staff as a whole.

The industrial context of rural secondary teaching during the 1999/2000 industrial dispute – the impact of economic rationalisaton on teachers' professional and personal lives

It is important to understand why the teachers in NSW, including AB and EF, felt the need to engage in industrial action during 1999/2000 dispute. The government and various educational researchers have acknowledged that the work of the teacher had become increasingly multi-faceted and intense. The 1998 Australian Senate Employment, Education and Training Reference Committee (ASEETRC) (1998) report recognised this intensification and acknowledged that many teachers still dedicate themselves to their students and the pursuit of higher standards of innovative educational provision despite:

- government allocation of finances to education having comparatively diminished;

- primarily negative media reports continually directed at highlighting 'alarming' educational issues to the community , such as the perceived decline in literacy standards;
- government ministers continuing to be relatively unsupportive of the work of teachers;
- the curriculum growing increasingly crowded and broader;
- support services for teachers having virtually disappeared; and
- those not 'familiar' with the work of teachers feeling little or no support, appreciation or esteem for those engaged in the education of the nation's youth.

(ASEETRC, 1998)

Further, Hargreaves (1999) believes that economic rationality permeates education policy in our postmodern society. That is, schools are expected to maintain their existence by ensuring they are competitive and highly aware of the necessity to provide education that enhances the students' abilities to participate in a globalised, capitalised and technologically-reliant society. This is supported by Marginson's (1993, p. 56) belief that education is increasingly "seen as a branch of economic policy, rather than a mix of social, economic and cultural policy". The pervasiveness of economic rationality within the 1999/2000 industrial dispute is also evident when one considers that teachers' salaries constitute over two per cent of GDP and five per cent of public outlays. Governments can therefore offload a major item of public sector expenditure by refusing to increase the salaries of the teachers, increase teacher-class size ratio, and not increasing resource provision (Robertson & Chadbourne, 1998).

By agreeing to a proposed increase in teacher salaries, along with suggested increases in government expenditure on educational resources to enhance the working conditions of the teachers, the NSW government would have to significantly increase public sector expenditure in an area that does not always display obvious short-term economic returns to society. Thus, using the perspective of theorists such as Hargreaves (1999), we may view the NSW Labor government's refusal to do this and their desire to attach economic indicators to education policy as economically rational behaviour. NSW teachers such as AB, CD and EF disagree that economic factors

should play such a role in education policy and consequently felt the need to engage in industrial action to support their stance as negotiations continued to fail.

Therefore, the underlying premise of this industrial dispute within the field of education was 'economics'. When asked if he believed that economic rationalism was behind the government's push to use productivity to determine pay increase, AB agreed stating:

> *...I think the government were trying to cut costs and push people just a little too hard in that area.*

EF concurred with AB's statement and also provided insight as to how this drive toward economic rationalisation of education would impact on the professional conditions and satisfaction of teachers by stating:

> *... It was more about the conditions rather than the pay ... I think the government's motivation was to try and drag more out of teachers than they previously do – if they understand what teachers do. I don't think they [the government] really understand how education works at all.*

The frustration and powerlessness of the teachers, such as AB and EF, is evident in their perception that the government clearly does not understand their profession and is dealing with education like it is a commodity that can be modified and altered in order to make it more 'economically viable'. Their use of harsh verbs such as "push too hard" and "drag more out" clearly highlight these perceptions. Both EF and AB recognise that their profession has intensified, and during the industrial dispute feared their work would become even more complex and perhaps not even achievable thereby affecting their professional and personal satisfaction. The teachers found it essential that their existing salary and conditions were maintained or preferably enhanced and the government's agreement be rejected.

In order to convey their discontent with the government's perceived desire to "drag more out" of the teachers, both government and non-government school teachers engaged in strike action and the banning of voluntary labour during the 1999/2000 NSW industrial dispute. When their ban on voluntary labour was perceived to be ineffective as negotiations with the government stalled, the teachers began to engage in more serious action by striking and withdrawing all services for periods of up to

twenty-four hours. AB stated that like many teachers at his non-government high school:

> *I went on a half-day strike, four one lesson strikes and one full day, twenty-four hour strike. We didn't do any after school meetings, any before school meetings, any KLA meetings, any staff meetings, any parent/teacher interviews, any sporting events outside normal school hours [ban on voluntary labour], we still fulfilled our duty of care duties like morning, recess, lunch and bus duty. This went on for a fair while since last October [1999] until recently [May 2000].*

AB and CD stated that because many of the NSW teachers in both the state and independent systems engaged in rolling strikes of between two lessons and twenty four hours duration, parents and community members became increasingly frustrated by the inconvenience caused by these actions, and consequently, many teachers such as the participants perceived that any sympathy and support the community may have had, rapidly dwindled as the dispute continued. This often occurs when teachers engage in industrial action according to Robertson and Chadbourne (1998). The participants believed that this worked in the favour of the government, as they felt that the unions failed to address this issue through the media. The participants' perception of the role of the unions during the industrial dispute and the ensuing impact on their professional and personal lives clearly warrants further discussion.

'A sense of solidarity' for a disempowered profession? – the importance of union membership during times of industrial disputation

The importance of union membership to the three participants became very clear when analysing the interview transcripts. The Independent Education Union (IEU) and the NSW Teachers' Federation (NSWTF) were key stakeholders in the 1999/2000 industrial dispute, with their media profile being quite high with regular media coverage expanding this profile throughout much of 1999 until May 2000.

According to Preston (1996), teachers have historically found it necessary to form and maintain unions in order to protect, promote and enhance their industrial and professional interests, and to manage more effectively the collective aspects of their

professional work. This then reportedly enhances the quality of their work and the satisfaction that may be derived from it. This is important for teachers such as EF who has always been a member of a union and has also been a union representative during his teaching career. He perceives unions as especially important given his time enduring adverse working conditions while teaching on Christmas Island. He cited one of the main reasons for remaining within the teaching profession was his enjoyment of the *"staff camaraderie"* and that being an active member of the IEU, makes him feel like he is working with *"the team"*.

Unions such as the IEU can act to produce an element of solidarity and collegiality among colleagues that is a critical retention factor for teachers, despite many of the negative aspects of the profession and its acknowledged intensification (Billingsley, 1993 cited in Shann, 1998; Little, 1990a). As stated by CD:

> *The professional support is really important, just being surrounded by people each day who go through the same things that I go through. When people are union members they know they are working together and it's* [a sense of professional solidarity] *sort of built in ...I just feel there is still a solidarity between people on the staff that are in the union ... you need that if you are going to be successful."*

CD conveys the importance of professional solidarity and mutual understanding to success, when the profession is so alienated from other societal institutions. This solidarity is reportedly enhanced by union membership, and its influence on the teachers cannot be underestimated, especially in schools such as AB's that has:

> *... one hundred per cent involvement in the IEU...*

The protracted industrial dispute may also be viewed as having affected the professional support CD claims to be so important in an unionised workplace, as teachers were divided into active and inactive union members, separated by their decisions about whether or not to engage in industrial action. While it is important to acknowledge that such a dispute can enhance feelings of solidarity and camaraderie within the profession, the experiences of the participants, as well as others within their immediate professional sphere, is somewhat more divisive. As stated by AB:

> *A couple of teachers were members of the IEU but they didn't strike and didn't believe in striking so no-one ridiculed them, but they were seen to, well everyone sort of talked behind their backs and spoke about them*

harshly ... they wanted to get paid because they believed they were pretty happy and they were fairly senior members of our school ...Some of them were a bit whingy and sooky and fought a bit too much and carried on a fair bit, more so the lazier ones...

Further AB found that the ban on voluntary labour personally had negative implications for him as he was pressured by several teachers to cancel a football game he had organised. He, like many other teachers, experienced much anguish and confusion due to his commitment to and satisfaction in providing the students with a comprehensive 'all-round education' and wanting to convey his collective discontent through withdrawing his voluntary labour, but not at the expense of the students (Robertson & Chadbourne, 1998). AB reported feeling like he had *"...let the kids down..."* by cancelling the game and also felt resentment and anger toward the teachers who pressured him to cancel.

CD further elaborated on how industrial action had a negative impact on staff relations and camaraderie by providing the example of his partner and one of her colleagues who are primary school teachers at a rural school where industrial action was split 50/50, with CD reported that their work environment during the dispute:

...really wasn't very comfortable for them.

This clearly conveys how divisive industrial disputes can be for staff members who have different opinions and reasons for engaging or not engaging in industrial action. Thus, while professionals such as EF cite professional solidarity and empathy as being one of the most beneficial aspects of union membership, the experiences of AB, CD and his partner convey that for them, this element of professional solidarity was often lacking during critical times. It then becomes apparent that the prolongment of the industrial negotiations may have benefited the NSW government as the profession became increasingly divided from within making them easier to 'conquer' during negotiations.

The powerlessness felt by many teachers during the 1999/2000 dispute was evident in their need rely on their unions to represent their industrial and professional needs in negotiations with a government they perceived to be more focused on economics than education. AB affirmed this perspective when he stated:

> *I didn't really have much to do with them* [the IEU] *until this dispute started but I guess they ensure that our wages are kept up with current inflation and our hours are kept within reasonable limits ... they also ensure our conditions are fine and everyone is treated fairly.*

AB's desire for his working conditions and salary to be *"reasonable"*, *"fair"* and *"fine"* was echoed by the other participants. Clearly, these teachers believed their stance during the industrial dispute was reasonable and justified, which may have assisted in their ability to remain motivated, despite numerous negative media reports and a perceived lack of support from the general community throughout this period.

With the necessity of a disempowered profession to negotiate through unions (evident by schools such as AB's having 100 per cent union membership), reported division within the profession during critical times such as the dispute, and apparent disagreement between teachers, the government and the community, about the remuneration and working conditions for teachers, it is not surprising that teachers such as those interviewed, believe that the perceived status of the teaching profession has rapidly declined and was highlighted during the dispute.

'Deflated footballs' – An analogy for the teaching profession

Dissatisfaction within the teaching profession is not a new phenomenon, according to Gardner (1991, cited in Gardner, 1998, p. 38) who last decade stated:

> *The voice of the teaching profession at the end of 1996 is cynical, pessimistic and profoundly weary ...A deep sense of impotence ... declining professional status ... and what they perceive as constant 'teacher-bashing' by the Government, the Opposition and the press has destroyed confidence ... Passion has been replaced by a sort of fin de siecle fatalism.*

Heafford and Jennison (1998), as well as Sinclair (1990), found that role intensification, declining provision of resources and working conditions, and diminished status of teachers were crucial factors that generate dissatisfaction, low commitment, low morale and greatly detract from the enjoyment of teaching. These factors, especially relating to the diminishing status of teaching, were mentioned by each of the participants in this particular research project.

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Theobald (1998, p. 29) adds to this, with her perception that there has never been a time when most teachers felt that they were being provided with the status and conditions they deserved. She cites the speech of R.H. Budd, Inspector-General of Education speaking before the Higinbotham Royal Commission in 1866, where he stated:

> *Somehow or other the profession of a teacher does not take. It is light work. They work five hours a day, five days a week. Their pay is not at all bad ... but there seems to be something peculiar in the profession of a teacher, so that men will not take to it till there is nothing else left for them to do.*

The views of the participants convey their belief that the stereotyped view of teaching, such as short hours and good salary, has changed little over the last one hundred and thirty-five years (ASEETRC, 1998) as stated by AB:

> *...They just think we have an easy job with kids and it's thirteen, fourteen, fifteen weeks off a year and $60 000 – $70 000 a year...*

EF further supported this statement, adding:

> "*...no-one seems to take it very seriously ...*"

Scott, Cox and Dinham's (1999) English study, reiterates EF's discontent and sense of alienation from those outside the profession, by highlighting that the most dissatisfying factors for English schoolteachers, were related to the community's perception of their profession. Especially frustrating, was the heightened criticism, often played out in the media, as well as community misconceptions about teachers' work, its scope and demands. Consequently, the teachers, such as those interviewed, feel misunderstood, alienated and taken-for-granted. The desire to be accorded with respect and esteemed for their ability to perform a difficult, 'serious' and important role in society is extremely apparent in the voices of the participants.

This is supported in the studies of Dinham (1997) and Boylan & McSwan (1998), wherein many participants felt that the NSWDET was 'not human' in their inability or unwillingness to address the pressures teachers endure and consequently, many teachers felt dehumanised by this negligence. The acknowledgement of the intensification of the profession (ASEETRC, 1998) and the perceived refusal of the government to financially reward the work of the teachers or accord them with a suitable status within society apparently distresses the participants to a great extent.

These factors all contribute to a general feeling of overwork, powerlessness and despondence in many teachers (Boylan & McSwan, 1998). CD communicates his feelings about teaching and being dehumanised by using an extremely vivid simile in his description of how he as a teacher feels at the end of a difficult day when he states:

> *Sometimes you feel like a deflated footy, going back to your office, but every time you save exploding, it's one point you score.*

CD appears to view his ability not to permanently surrender to anger and dissatisfaction as an achievement of which to be proud, akin to leaving the field after winning a game and keeping points accumulating on the score board. Informal discussions with other secondary teachers the researcher encounters during her casual employment in a school in a rural city reiterate the importance of further investigation this issue.

The perceived hesitation of the NSW government to improve the working conditions and salary of teachers was interpreted by the participants and the NSWTF and the IEU, as being an indication of the low status accorded to teachers by the government and the community. The strong feelings felt about this was conveyed be EF stating:

> *I was disappointed with the Labor government which has traditionally supported teachers and schools and hospitals...*

The narrowing gap between the right and left within the Australian political context and the pervasive nature of economic rationalism in education policy formulation and implementation has had a significant impact on the professional conditions and status of teachers in recent years (Apple, 1986 cited in Woods & Jeffrey, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994 cited in Woods & Jeffrey, 1996; Marginson, 1997b). EF believed this to be an important issue during the dispute as he observed:

> *I think they [the unions] were very justified in their drive to lift the status of teachers and I think the climate we are in, which is conservative and concerned with making businesses viable and successful, I think there is still misunderstanding about the status of teachers, or the position of teachers and how much we put in ...*

CD believed that the position of the unions and collective bargaining, was also being undermined and the unions disempowered (Robertson & Chadbourne 1998). This occurred, according to CD, when the government agreed to the agreement proposed by the IEU, but simultaneously refused to ensure the same working conditions and

salary conditions for casual teachers and non-teaching school staff, as full-time teachers. Consequently, the members of the IEU voted to refuse the government's agreement that resulted in the further prolonging of the dispute for all members.

Clearly, the participants, as well as other educational researchers, have twinned the issues of industrial disputation relating to working conditions and salaries of teachers, with the status of the teaching profession within the community. The NSW Labor government's refusal to ratify an agreement that would enhance the working conditions of teachers, has been interpreted by those within and associated with the teaching profession, as an acknowledgement and affirmation of the low status accorded to teachers within Australian society.

The ability of the participants to engage in industrial action for a significant duration against such a formidable opponent as the NSW government, while believing they were not supporting by most of the community, may lie in their acceptance of the nature of their profession. They acknowledge that the intense nature of the profession, their perceived lack of status within society and the failure of the government, the NSWDET, school administrators, and many members of the community to understand or appreciate their profession are extremely dissatisfying and disturbing. However, their ability to derive satisfaction from factors intrinsic to teaching allows them to remain committed to and essentially satisfied with teaching.

The participants involved in this particular study do not convey the same cynicism, pessimism and weariness described by Gardner's study (1998). Although they are disappointed with the declining status of the profession and the perceived lack of support of the community, the government, the administration of the schools and the media, and are especially disappointed with the impact industrial disputation had on their professional and personal lives, they still remain committed to the profession, deriving much enjoyment from their work. As stated by AB, CD and EF, they are challenged, stimulated and rewarded by working with children.

Alienated and dislocated – a profession misunderstood and misrepresented

The sense of segregation from those not closely associated with the teaching profession has been a clear and constant message communicated by the participants. Dinham (1992 cited in Dinham 1997) revealed that many non-teachers were frequently not aware of the less visible demands of teaching and the pressures and stress these demands can cause both within teachers' professional and personal lives. The intensification of the profession and increased levels of accountability means that many teachers are now finding such demands to be 'unrealistic' (Boylan & McSwan, 1998; Dinham, 1997). As stated by EF:

> *I think there is still misunderstanding about the status of teachers or the position of teachers and how much we put in. There is more to education than just turning up at 9.00am and teaching the classes. We are all aware of that.*

The participants and the profession in general, perceive that the community has perhaps been misinformed about the work of teachers as is conveyed by EF's use of "we", which further highlights the segregation of the profession from the wider community and other professions. This segregation may be self-imposed, given that each participant clearly stated that they do not believe that those outside the profession understand the complex and intense nature of teachers' work, and the participants no longer attempting to explain the nature of their work to non-teachers.

The role of the media in the 'misunderstanding' and alienation of the teaching profession also warrants discussion, given that the 1999/2000 industrial dispute was to a great extent, played out in the mass media. The participants believed that the IEU and NSWTF were unsuccessful in generating public sympathy and support for the teachers, during and immediately after the industrial dispute by not using the media to portray a more positive representation of teachers to the community. The participants felt somewhat underwhelmed by the unions' efforts and appeared to feel further alienated from the community during the period of the dispute.

CD was very clear in his perception of the IEU:

I wasn't impressed [with how the union acted on behalf of the teachers during the dispute] ... *I certainly wasn't as happy with the service we received* [from the IEU]... *I certainly haven't the teachers' position put across clearly, as what it could be.*

According to Robertson and Chadbourne (1998), mobilising a successful campaign is essential in mustering and maintaining public support during industrial disputes. The participants felt the IEU and NSWTF could have effectively promoted their cause by twinning the desired improvements in teachers' salaries and working conditions other quality issues in education (such as enhancement of scarce resources). According to AB:

I just think the IEU should have advertised – used the media more to portray teachers as a better person than they actually did, because a lot of people in the community had no idea what was going on and they portrayed us as striking and I guess 'bad people', whereas we're not...

AB's perception that the community viewed the striking teachers as "bad people", clearly relates how the teachers feel alienated, accorded low status and held in low opinion by the non-teaching community. The view of AB was supported in the ASEETRC (1998) report that recognised that there need to be more attention paid to the positive promotion of the complex and high quality work performed by teachers in order to enhance community understanding of teachers and the education system in general. This would then generate more support and appreciation that is so important to the teachers and their professional satisfaction and commitment. As suggested by AB, moves should be made to encourage the government to advertise and recognise how well teachers are performing despite poor resources, intensification of the profession and various negative social factors, such as lack of community support. AB proposed that the government should:

...advertise on TV what a good job teachers do and explain what we received and portrayed the teacher perhaps in the classroom assisting learning instead of all of us in a room voting on a strike ...

The recognition of the importance of such positive publicity was evident in the television advertising campaign that began in January of 2001 financed by the NSW Teachers' Federation, which sought to promote the work done by teachers in the government system. This was then closely followed by a second positive publicity campaign beginning in March 2001, financed by the NSW government that also

sought to highlight the importance of public schooling and the high quality education provided by teachers within the government system. This is extremely interesting given how acrimonious negotiations between these two parties were during the dispute.

Teacher bashing - An occupational hazard

When discussing the role of the IEU and the NSWTF in the 1999/2000 industrial dispute, all of the teachers interviewed commented on the negative portrayal of teachers within the mass media. Their disenchantment with 'teacher bashing' was obvious as the concept was raised quite often and was clearly linked with their perceptions of teacher status, feelings of alienation and personal satisfaction with teaching. Further, Dinham's study (1997) highlighted the important role the media play in reinforcing how the community perceives their teachers. For AB, the media portrayal of teachers during and after the dispute left him feeling frustrated, disappointed and more isolated, as:

> *They really portrayed us as chanting on the streets and voting for strikes and the only time they* [showed us on the television]... *was when we were on strikes ... I guess there was more negative publicity than positive.*

CD's perception was very clear and strongly voiced:

> *I thought it* [the media portrayal] *was abysmal to say the least. I thought it was absolutely disgusting, the way that teachers were made out and how they were made out to be people who wanted more"*

CD then conveyed his belief that the unions' perceived inaction and failure to strategically use the media to positively portray teachers (Robertson & Chadbourne, 1998) has and will have a long-term and negative impact for the teaching profession and the community's perception of teachers when he stated:

> *But I think in the face of the everyday persona, walking down the street, I think irreparable damage has been done because, and probably coming back to the media again, that it was just so one-sided and they just don't understand. The IEU tried to mount a campaign but they weren't overly successful.*

This was supported by AB's belief that due to the unions' failure to positively engage the media during the dispute, the community now had an even less favourable perception of teachers, when he stated:

The community, I guess, perceive teachers as, I guess, always being on strike and always bludging and wanting more money. That's all people would say to us in the street 'Oh you're striking, yeah good on you, more money, good on you, more holidays, yeah, that's the go'. Our union didn't actually advertise enough and portray our teachers as fighting for a good cause, not just for themselves"

According to existing literature, many teachers feel the compulsion to justify or defend one's profession, or at worst, to even feel ashamed of their profession, regardless of whether they are English, Australian or New Zealanders (ASEETRC 1998; Dinham & Scott 1998; Scott, Cox and Dinham 1999). The participants felt this keenly during the industrial dispute, with their frustration and powerlessness evident in the statements of AB and EF:

AB: *...Sometimes I did [have to justify myself as a teacher]. Sometimes I couldn't be bothered and laugh and walk away...*

EF: *Yes I have felt that I had to explain what I actually do as a teacher to combat the stereotypes that some people have of teachers (especially in relation to the holidays, hours and so on) ...*

It is evident that these teachers feel greatly misunderstood and alienated by those outside the teaching profession. The extent of the frustration felt by the teachers is clear as they can so coherently verbalise what they view as the problem, such as EF's statement *"I don't think they [the community] realise, I don't think they can picture it"*, yet they realise they most likely will not be understood by people those who possess stereotypical perceptions of the profession. The effect this has on the self-concept of the teachers should not be underestimated.

During the 1999/2000 dispute the perceived lack of community support and understanding of the disputed issues was conveyed by CD's experience when:

I was out to dinner a couple of months ago now, and there were these people talking about the dispute afterwards and obviously didn't know the facts. I got quite irate with them as they were saying 'bloody teachers, bloody this, bloody that'. And I said 'Well do you know the issues?'. And

this bloke who was a loudmouth all through dinner, he certainly didn't know much about it.

AB was also extremely disappointed and frustrated to be on the receiving end of many negative comments made by people, who like those encountered by CD 'obviously didn't know the facts' and stated:

I got a fair bit of bagging through friends and people outside of school saying: 'You bludging teachers, you want more time off and more money'. People saying that all we wanted was more time off and money and they didn't understand that we were going for conditions and our wage increases were just like inflation over the next four years, like similar to what they are earning, if not less than what they get.

Again, hearing oneself being referred to as a 'bludging teacher' clearly impacts upon the self-concept of the teachers. AB also verbalises the desire of teachers to be perceived like other adult professions, by comparing the desire of the teachers to ensure they are provided with conditions and salary increases 'similar' to those received by the rest of the more highly-esteemed professions. The frustration and disappointment of the participants is abundantly clear when CD stated:

...Teaching is not seen as being a status profession. It's not highly esteemed ... Yep, there is definitely a low status accorded to teachers...

This is then supported by EF, who stated:

But they don't recognise the demands, the emotional demands of the classroom. No teacher has a non-emotional day. You just cope. You can go to an office and exist for a day. You can work in a shop and be fairly non-productive for a day and it won't affect anyone. You can't do that in a classroom. You're facing thirty-odd personalities who are demanding of your time. You have to forget where you're at and be there. And I think that's what wears us out and it hurts when other people just don't appreciate it ... you just sit and wonder 'Boy, what do you have to do?

EF quite openly admits that it hurts to realise that the intense and complex work he performs is unappreciated, underestimated, not even properly understood and extremely stereotyped. Most people who have passed through the education system believe they know what it is like to be a teacher. However, as stated by EF, the other participants and the federal government in its reports, these people do not recognise the demands of teaching are constant and unabating on the emotional, academic, and

physical reserves of the teacher. EF verbalises he frustration, confusion and near helplessness that characterises many of the teachers when he wonders "Boy what do you have to do?"

Thus, it is clear that the participants who already felt unappreciated and misunderstood by the general community prior to the 1999/2000 dispute, had this situation exacerbated greatly by the perceived negative media attention and came to feel even more alienated from society than before. With the intensity of the teaching profession acknowledged, the low status accorded to teachers discussed, and the alienation felt by teachers highlighted, it is therefore important that we discuss the paradoxical nature of the contemporary teaching profession.

Low status/high expectations – a professional paradox

This concept began to emerge from the very first interview with AB. As he discussed the intense nature of teachers' work and his perception that the community holds high expectations of education while according teachers with low status, the concept of a professional paradox emerged. This was then further investigated during the following two interviews within this smaller project, and the seventeen other interviews that have been undertaken in the larger PhD project, and has been highlighted as a concept of significance. The impact this paradox has on the professional and personal lives of the teachers interviewed is very substantial, as will be further discussed.

Heafford and Jennison (1998) observed that one of the most important factors relating to teacher retention, is esteem showed to teachers through expressions of praise, confidence and support from parents, students, the community and governments. The observation of Jeffrey and Woods (1996) is supported in the research of Boylan and McSwan (1998), that revealed the major sources of teaching dissatisfaction were non-teaching related issues, such as lack of community support. When asked if they received any positive community feedback during the 1999/2000 industrial dispute AB responded:

> *I'll tell you who did give us some positive feedback were the people who were more well-informed... people who knew teachers and knew what*

exactly was going on. It was usually just ill-informed people that you'd argue with.

Again, the isolation of 'teachers' from 'non-teachers' is revealed, as the participants' perception that the wider community does not understand their profession and was highlighted during the dispute. Further, it appears that this isolation is exacerbated by the participants' perception that this inability to understand is the choice of the community, when stating that people who supported them were "more well-informed" and those who did not were "ill-informed". Thus the isolation and alienation of teachers from the wider community may be interpreted as being **reactionary and cyclical**. That is:

- the teachers do not feel supported, appreciated or understood by the community that they perceive as not being well-informed, either by choice or by lack of interest;
- little publicity or positive media attention is provided which would act to communicate with and inform the community about the nature of the teaching profession;
- the community remains 'ill-informed' about the nature of teaching and continue to perpetuate existing stereotypes of the profession; and
- teachers continue to feel unsupported, unappreciated and misunderstood, and the cycle continues.

Therefore, while those with 'insider knowledge' such as the teachers and the teacher unions continue to remain isolated from the wider community, and not share this knowledge with those outside the profession, existing stereotypes will continue to be perpetuated and teachers will continue to perceive themselves as being alienated from society at large. Clearly, the perceptions of both teachers and the general community need to be modified if the status and esteem of the teaching profession are to be enhanced. This will not occur if the government and the media continue to be more focused on 'teacher bashing' and criticising existing practices, rather than promoting and highlighting existing quality educational practices.

All three of the interviewees in this study conveyed their perception that the community did not understand or appreciate their work. They also highlighted the

importance of the relationship between community support and appreciation of the work of teachers, and the professional and personal satisfaction of the teachers. Further investigation of this issue is necessary, so the dynamics of this relationship may be better understood.

Extrinsic vs intrinsic rewards – the relationship between occupational status, professional satisfaction and teacher retention/attrition as highlighted by the 1999/2000 industrial dispute

The impact of critical incidents such as the 1999/2000 dispute, as well teachers' perception of how they are viewed by those outside the profession, and their personal satisfaction or dissatisfaction with teaching, play a large role in professional retention or attrition. Kirby and Grissmer (1993, cited in Shen, 1997) use the human capital theory of occupational choice to suggest that individual teachers make systematic assessments of the costs and benefits of remaining within the profession or leaving it. Job satisfaction is of great importance to teachers making these assessments (Shann, 1998). In the case of AB, he can visualise the benefits, such as satisfactory salary, holidays and freedom to explore other occupational choices, only subsuming the negative aspects for a period of six to ten years. This is not unusual according to Grissmer and Kirby (1989 cited in Shen, 1997), Shann (1998) and Shen (1997), as the attrition rate for young teachers in the early stages of their career, such as AB is high, while teachers with seniority, experience and in the middle stage of their career (such as CD) have a lower attrition rate, and teachers nearing the end of their career (such as EF), exhibit higher attrition rates again. Therefore the attainment of the 16 per cent pay increase was important to AB's personal satisfaction, however his professional satisfaction was negatively impacted upon during the dispute as he stated:

> *I couldn't believe how long it actually took for wage negotiations to take place. In four years time, they're going to do that again and they're going to go over this rigmarole again ... I can't really be bothered doing it all over again.*

For CD, the dispute was professionally very unsatisfying, as he perceived the industrial dispute as yet another forum within which the status of the teaching profession was attacked and diminished by the government and the community. This is evident in his statement:

A small study such as this one, can only suggest issues requiring further study and draw tentative conclusions about the participants within its own context. This project, used grounded theory development to discover the main concerns of the participants in substantive areas such as the teachers being satisfied with teaching, but feeling dissatisfied the impact the industrial dispute had on their perceived status. While investigating the impact that the 1999/2000 dispute had on these teachers, it has become abundantly clear that the teachers want others to know how intense *and* complex their profession is and how alienated they feel from those outside the profession. Since this study took place, a further seventeen rural secondary school teachers have been interviewed with more rich data revealing how they perceive their profession and how they adapt in an ever-evolving professional environment. By using a grounded theory framework and integrating various relevant theoretical and empirical elements of the sociology of education and the sociology of change, it is intended that an accurate and in-depth theory of context may be developed. This would allow for the exploration of how secondary teachers cope with and adapt to societal, legal, economic, cultural and political change, and the impact this has on their lived realities.

This original study and the subsequent interviews that have taken place since have revealed that the teachers want someone to tell their stories, relating to the reality of teaching within the NSW education system. The smaller study focused on the experiences of three rural secondary school teachers and their experiences during the 1999/2000 dispute. The data then provided a new research direction as it was indicated that there were much wider concerns and issues involved in the lived realities of these teachers that went beyond the scope of the interviews that related to their experiences during the industrial dispute, such as the demands of educational policy modification and implication placed on their already intense workload. This has reportedly been one of the most unsatisfactory aspects of their profession and has a significant impact upon their professional and personal satisfaction.

By delimiting the existing parameters and extending the focus beyond the historical context of the industrial dispute to consider the wider ramifications of change agendas in terms of the lived reality of teachers it is hoped that a more comprehensive

representation of their realities may be revealed, which may then have an informative impact on those within and outside the profession (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

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